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VOLUNTARY READING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS ¹

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The reason why I stick to child-study through thick and thin, notwithstanding its crudities, its oddities, its futilities—the reason why I still stand up for it and urge it upon my students, is because it is the only antidote I know of against the vitiated atmosphere of our profession; vitiated constantly, inevitably, like the lead-poisoned air that house-painters have to breathe, by the assumption that human beings in their mental endowments, especially in early years, are substantially alike. It is the practical ignoring, in our popular education, of the fundamental fact of individuality. Our classifications, our courses of study, time limits, examinations, rankings, classes, diplomas, all tend to blind us and paralyze our common-sense, inasmuch that, although we know better, we still act and talk as if we didn't, as if we really believed that the meager pharmacopœa of pedagogy contained a sovereign remedy for every mental ill or defect. Now, with all its imperfections on its head, child-study does tend to open one's eyes to human individuality, quite as marked in children by the way, as we had the trick to see't, as in ourselves, probably more so. Systematic psychology, from the very fact that it *is* systematic—that is, that it dwells *more scientifico* on the qualitative resemblances that constitute mankind a genus, and thereby leads the student straight away from those quantitative differences, the more or less of our various faculties or endowments that stamp every one of us with individuality and entitle each to a local habitation and a distinctive name—psychology as a science, I say, especially in the hands of a young student, may easily do him more harm than good. It is not the fundamental ingredients, so to speak, that analysis finds in human nature as a whole, it isn't *that* that the teacher most needs to

¹ Read at the meeting of the New England Association of Teachers of English, November, 1904. The general topic was "Voluntary Reading: Can it be Related to School English?"

know; it is the proportions in which these ingredients enter into combination; not so much the permanent *what* that constitutes our common humanity, as the ever-varying *how much* that determines our individual personality. Classify children as we will on their qualitative resemblances to one another, we never thereby get a step nearer to the quantitative differences that always distinguish John from Peter and Mary from Martha. Psychology makes them all human, and inferentially alike; the pedagogy we need will recognize wide and insurmountable differences between them. These differences, as I said, we ignore; or if we are compelled to accord them recognition theoretically, we minimize or wholly disregard them in practice. Just as certain savages, we are told, cannot conceive of death as a natural process, but always regard it, at whatever age, as due to some malign influence from without, so we teachers are wont to attribute the failure of our pupils to realize the ideals and aims that have guided our instruction, to faulty methods or untoward external conditions rather than to inborn and irremediable defects or idiosyncrasies in the pupils themselves. Now, physicians do not accept the imputation of malpractice whenever a patient grows worse or dies in their hands; the only physician I ever read of who undertook the responsibility of restoring the dead to life was Æsculapius, and he lost his own, you remember, by the practice; the captain of a wrecked ship is not, as a matter of course, discredited on account of the disaster to his vessel; no one thinks the less of the generalship of Lee because of his final surrender. But somehow, if failure is discovered in reaching the lofty aspirations of our formal education, we seldom hesitate to charge all upon the teacher or the method. Take this subject of English—and I know no better illustration of the point I am trying to make. I have read lately several pungent articles in the magazines deploring the failure of our schools and colleges to accomplish what they are evidently striving to do, namely, make all their pupils facile and correct users of English and lovers of its best literature. Not one of these earnest gentlemen, I think, betrayed the slightest recognition of the sheer impossibility of the undertaking. The articles were one and all pitched in about the same key, a minor for the most part, in view of such meager results as are everywhere to be seen, and which, it was implied, might have been expected from the stupidity or per-

versity of the methods employed; but the strain was finally modulated into a more cheerful major as the writer confided to us the encouraging prospect that all this might be changed and success achieved by means which he had "up his sleeve." The community seems to expect of us some device or expedient whereby all our pupils may be made, if not to lead their class, at least to stand well above the average; and the worst of it is, we ourselves appear to have accepted and indorsed this demand as reasonable, and to take blame to ourselves and lavish it upon our brethren when there is failure to meet such absurd expectations.

One trouble is that we are all specialists, with an unappeasable yearning to make our specialty the endowment and possession of all mankind. The music-teacher thinks everybody ought to sing and to play at least one instrument; the publicist feels that every youth should be taught the institutions of civil government under which he lives; the man of science believes it indispensable for the young to form correct habits of observation and inference in dealing with natural phenomena; the business man says that all young people should be well grounded in the theory and practice of accounts and business forms and usages; the scholar thinks it a shame for a person to go through life knowing but one language; and so on indefinitely.

But is this a large or reasonable frame of mind? Who is sufficient for these things? What sort of a creature would a universal specialist be, such as I fear most teachers would like to make of every child born into the world? Herbert Spencer, I venture to say, saw nothing to smile at when he wrote, reproachfully, that there are men who would blush if caught saying *Iphigēnia*, but would show not the slightest shame in confessing that they do not know where the Eustachian tubes are. Suppose you know where they are, what can you do about it? Must everybody be an accurate anatomist? Must everybody know everything that anybody knows?

Now, I believe that nearly every subject studied in our schools and colleges at the present day may fairly be considered a specialty, and that a special aptitude is requisite to gain a mastery of it. But what proportion, think you, of the people one meets in an hour's walk through the principal streets of any large city, or in a day's drive in

the country, know anything whatever of science or literature, as scholars understand the meaning of those words? I doubt if any of us, after due reflection, put the number so high as one in ten. Well, now, my point is, where are the nine? For my part, I cannot escape the conviction, not only that the instruction which may have been bestowed upon them in those realms of knowledge has been wasted, but that any instruction or training to which they could have been exposed, under the most favorable conditions, would likewise and equally have been wasted. Your dull ass will not mend his pace with beating. Someone will say: Why send the nine to school at all, then? I answer: For the good and sufficient reason that you cannot tell beforehand, nor without ample trial, which is the one and which the nine. So both must grow together till the harvest. But don't blame the reapers or the sowers if tares do not ripen into wheat.

The term "universal education" is perhaps responsible for the notion that the mass of mankind is practically homogeneous, and that all are about equally educable. Nothing, in my judgment, could be more erroneous or more mischievous. I believe that the proportion of those born into the world capable of education, in any sense of the word not so superficial as to be ludicrous, is so exceeding small that, quantitatively considered, they would form but the thinnest crust, the merest pellicle or film, upon the mass of the race. I believe that the conceptions of science, the appreciation of literature and art, the comprehension of government, the power of invention, the faculty of direction and control, or even the aspiration toward these things, reside in the few, and are as foreign to the great majority, even in civilized lands and in the great centers of population, as is the power of flight. *And yet* I would abate nothing of the opportunities, nothing of the facilities, offered to children and youth for enlarging the scope of their minds and cultivating to the fullest extent every talent with which they may be gifted. I am proud of the spirit of our people, that has attracted, and is increasingly attracting, the attention of the civilized world to its multiform and effective educational work. I am reluctant to admit the justice of the term "superstition" which Professor Wendell applies to it. Still, it is clear, I think, that our free schools, day and evening—almost a "continuous performance," in fact—with their free textbooks and stationery; our compulsory-attendance laws,

with truant officers to go out into the highways and hedges and compel children to come in; our free public libraries almost in sight of one another; our printing-presses "whose sore task does not divide the Sunday from the week," turning out readable editions of the classics for a few cents a volume; and, more potent than all, the fact that education with us has come to be, as Emerson says, "the word of ambition," that it is the fashion, the test of respectability, almost of decency—this prodigious, all-sided atmospheric pressure has swept and forced and jammed into the schools thousands upon thousands who have no business there, but whom it is impossible to weed out and get rid of. It is right and proper that all children should be received with open arms into the lower grades, that they should be taught, even wooed, by the most skilful and seductive teachers, that they should be generously tested and promptly promoted as they are found fit. But this, it seems, will not answer. They must be pushed and squeezed up and up until not a few of them, by hook or by crook—mostly by crook—at length stand in line and take their diplomas in our colleges and professional schools. What is fondly called the "education" of such is but a mask, a simulacrum, and implies no real culture whatever. I wonder how many decades must pass before a frank and general recognition of this great fact shall relieve our schools of the heaviest incubus that now clings to them, impeding their work and dragging them down. As one condition of such a millennium, educators must come to their senses and cease to harp upon faulty methods and unskilful technic as the only thing that stands in the way of making all children alike and enabling every pupil to rank in the first third of his class. It is discreditable to our intelligence to stand in such an attitude.

I come now to the question immediately before us. In order to fortify myself with fresh facts, I appealed to the experience of about one hundred and fifty of my teachers and students as to their voluntary reading in the period of childhood from eight to twelve. They represent, of course, a selected body, all being graduates of high schools, and a few of colleges. As compared with all the children of the community between the ages indicated, the contributors of my facts would be, in point of intelligence, far above the average. They were asked to state, first, the character and extent of their

voluntary reading during those four or five years; secondly, what had attracted them to this reading, and what they found in it; and, thirdly, whether it was connected with or suggested by their work in school. From their testimony it appears beyond question that a very large amount of reading was done by nearly all at this period; that much, if not most, of it was done at random and as a matter of course, with little discrimination or reflection, and little obvious effect upon mind or character. The motives leading to and sustaining it were various. First, perhaps, the great abundance of reading matter surrounding the child on every hand and pressed to his very lips—books garnished with pictures; books received as presents, and therefore imposing some obligation to read them; books recommended by parents, teachers, and especially by associates; books read from pride or vanity to seem acquainted with what was in them, and talk about it; but most of all, I think, books read from genuine, though superficial and transient, interest. This interest revealed two pretty well-marked types of mind, as to susceptibility to the influences of literature: one I may call the poetic or imaginative type; the other, the prosaic or matter-of-fact. In many individuals there was, of course, more or less blending of the two, but in others a distinct and often wide separation appeared. Fables, fairy-stories, extravagancies of every sort, were, by one type of mind, eagerly sought and fed upon; the opposite type rejected all such because they were not true or probable to the understanding, preferring stories of children precisely like themselves and their playmates and recording commonplace doings and happenings such as filled their own everyday lives. The latter class included some—mostly girls—who manifested a relish, sometimes perhaps acquired or reflected from their elders, for the sentimental, or the conventionally good, or the goody, or what I may call the dilute heroic.

A large majority reported that their reading had little or no connection with school, except as books from the public libraries were sometimes distributed by the teachers. But a minority traced their interest in many good lines of reading to stories or selections read or suggestions given by their teachers. This seemed to be on the increase; that is, a larger proportion of the younger than of the older students and teachers referred to this source.

Two conclusions I am reluctantly compelled to draw from these reports: First, that a large proportion of the mass of reading furnished our children is unstimulating, uninforming, and wholly unprofitable for the development of minds of any texture or promise; it is commonplace and without literary quality or flavor. Oh and alas! the herd of facile writers who have nothing of importance to say, and who say it in a manner devoid of distinction or reserve; who, failing to secure any adult audience, fall upon the helpless children! Oh and alas! the publishers whose only criterion and justification is whether a book can be made to sell! My second conclusion is, that there is, on the one hand, no art or method whereby children can be supplied with reading matter even tolerably adapted to their tastes and capacities; or be restrained, on the other hand, from a cloying and suffocating excess of even the best literature. The idea of restraint has taken no deep root in the community. I am compelled to believe that at the age I am now considering it is better to leave children to the guidance of their instincts, with a considerable variety of matter to select from, than to compel or urge or even recommend. I say *better*, using the comparative degree, for, so far as I can discern, the *best* way, the superlative, is not yet in sight. When we know vastly more than anybody knows now of the manifold nature of childhood, and the manifold ways in which its development into healthy maturity is effected or arrested, we may reach a solution of what is at present an unsolved problem.

If the parent or the teacher possesses two very rare qualifications—namely, love of good literature and sympathy with children—much may be done by reading aloud suitable classic stories, “without note or comment.” I must repeat “without note or comment,” and I must add, in case of the teacher, without the odious, hated afterclap of an examination or composition. For it is not in the surface froth that may be churned up by pedagogic nagging, but in the deep and silent recesses of the soul, that literature does its work. I am in full sympathy also with Professor Norton’s admonition not to attempt to make reading serve other branches of study, as is now so much the fashion. I hate the very sight of a “reader,” with a qualifying adjective that betrays its true character as a book, not of genuine literature, but of science or history or what not.

When I was a boy, it was taken as a good sign to see a child with his face in a book. Books were scarce then, and for the most part not inviting, except to the few whom they might concern. But times have changed. The deluge has come. As the season of Christmas approaches, for forty days and forty nights it rains books, and there is no ark of refuge. In the name of the children, I thank heaven that "Christmas comes but once a year." I think Mrs. Hunt makes an important omission in not including print among dangerous stimulants and narcotics, for it may be either when taken in overdoses by persons of feeble mental constitution, and especially by children. I therefore suggest that a child with the reading propensity strongly developed needs watching, like one who shows a taste for wine. Taking our whole school population, I do not believe there is more than one in ten who will be much benefited by such reading as he is likely to do in early childhood; and this mainly on account of the excess of it, which often forms a sort of glaze over the intelligence and sensibilities, or else induces a grasshopper habit of skipping from page to page in search of exciting episodes. A child or youth besotted by reading may fall into a passive habit of mind that will receive and absorb, sponge-like, any quantity of knowledge *about* things, but remain incapable and apathetic as to any active contact with the things themselves.

President Eliot says, if correctly reported, that "fifteen minutes a day of good reading would give anyone" of that class of our fellow-beings whom he seems to regard—rightly, I think—as *infra-human*, living, as he expresses it, in "a mental vacuum;" he says that a certain small amount of good reading each day would lift anyone of this multitude into "a really human life." Now, I cannot but think that the admirable president's own superior mind, and his long association with a highly selected class of men and women, may have betrayed him into a far too optimistic view of the educability of the lowermost strata of our people, and of the efficacy of good reading to transform a mental vacuum into a mental plenum. I should as soon think of prescribing fifteen minutes a day of scraping on the violin for one who had no ear for tone or rhythm. Do not misunderstand me. As parent or teacher I would meet every child with a reverent and expectant attitude, the attitude, almost of awe, with

which Emerson was wont to receive every youthful stranger ("This may be one out of a hundred thousand!"); but I would not, hoping against hope, stay in this attitude indefinitely, or take blame to myself without better reason than the naked fact that my pupil failed to improve. What sort of economy would it be if any agriculturist, in the varied and broken soil of New England, were to bestow, year after year, equally upon every square rod of his possession the same share of his seed, his fertilizers, and his labor?

My plea, fellow-teachers, when reduced to its lowest terms, is only for better and better discrimination in the use of the splendid means which we already possess.